

HOW CAMAQUITO OPENS ITS HEART FOR KIDS IN CUBA

A Munich-based charity supports the youngest on this Caribbean island. And now it's renovating a maternity clinic.

by Wolfgang Ziegler, MZ

MUNICH /ZURICH / CAMAGUEY

Camaquito's motto could not be more to the point: "Los niños primero" (the kids come first) its banner proclaims – and it means it: starting out in 2001 the founder, Mark Kuster (39), has implemented a succession of support projects in Camaguey, Cuba's third largest city. Under his leadership Camaquito constructs schools, renovates kindergartens, and, assisted by the Cuban government, a large team of volunteers, and a sizeable sum of donations, is currently undertaking the renovation of an entire maternity clinic.

And this is just one of eleven individual projects managed by Mark Kuster – for which he has found some prominent helpers. Jörg Stiel, former captain of the Swiss national football team, now serves as a Camaquito ambassador, as too do Heinrich Villinger, cigar manufacturer, and the former Miss Switzerland, Anita Buri. Financial support is given by Zurich's Lions Club, the Swiss airline, Edelweiss Air, and several travel operators, including Europe's largest provider of Study Tours, Studiosus in Munich – to where, just in the last days, the registered office of Camaquito Deutschland e.V., founded in 2003, has been transferred, having started off in a small town in Baden Württemberg.

A Children's Theatre Goes on Tour

"Before a project in Cuba reaches the implementation phase, a great deal of persuasion and lobbying has to be undertaken," Mark Kuster explains in an interview with our newspaper. Yet, for the Swiss citizen, previously

active in international insurance, a resident of Camaguey since 2003, and meanwhile married to a Cuban, life could be tougher. For one thing that he is backed by Camaguey's district government; and he has repeatedly shown what is possible "since I am fully convinced by the work I am doing for the children and adolescents," as he says. For example Kuster, whose salary is not covered by donations, but comes from his employment with the non-profit support society Club Villa Mariana, has set up the program "Fútbol en los barrios" (Football in the Outskirts) under which some 1,000 children and adolescents have been brought off the streets and are given soccer coaching by football and sports teachers on the nearest playing fields. Camaquito also provides sports equipment to those Camaguey youth teams participating in national competitions.



Founder Mark Kuster – local presence



La Andariega – Camaguey kids on stage



A massive task: a renovated maternity ward

A further way of usefully occupying and encouraging children is provided by *La Andariega*, a children's theatre whose work has already gained recognition abroad, and who will next year make a short tour in Germany. And another beneficiary of Camaquito's cultural activities is the renowned Ballet de Camaguey – the dancers' living quarters are in part financed by the charity. Yet for Mark Kuster the largest and most important task is the complete renovation of the Ana Betancourt de Mora maternity clinic. Constructed in 1942, the hospital's main building was first given new windows, currently birth and operating rooms

THE CHARITY

Camaquito is a politically and confessionally independent international children's charity. Founded 2001 in Switzerland, 2003 in Germany and 2007 in Spain. In all three countries a recognized charity.

► **Support** is project specific and requirement-based for children and adolescents in the fields of education, sport, culture and health. Camaquito does not distribute any money in Cuba, but instead operates directly within the specific projects.

► **In the past years** Camaquito has been able to allocate 1.5 million Swiss Franks of donation funds into lasting investments in Cuba – specifically, construction and renovation of educational premises, hospitals and water projects (enabling connections to the mains drinking water)

► **Camaquito projects** focus on Camaguey Province in the heart of Cuba. Camaquito has had a local project office since 2003 run by the Swiss founder Mark Kuster.

► Visiting Mark Kuster in Camaguey

eMail: mkuster@camaquito.org,
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► **Donations:** Kinderhilfsorganisation Camaquito Deutschland e.V. Stadtparksee Munich Acct.1002660023 Bank Code 701 500 00 IBAN: DE78701500001002660023 BIC: SSKM DE MM

► **Infos: More on** Camaquito: www.camaquito.org,
On Camaguey City and destination Cuba:
www.visitcuba.de (zi)

are being renovated, after which the replacement of the sanitary facilities is planned. Thanks to its donors Camaquito has already contributed around 150,000 Swiss Franks.

Yet the charity's most valuable assets-- the name is a mixing of Camaguey and the Spanish word *chiquito* (little) – are the local helpers. One of them is Eduardo Jiménez Ramírez (40), whose main job is with the Cuban cultural organisation Asociación Hermanos Saíz, and who has been an active voluntary supporter of Camaquito over the last five years. For him the most important thing is the charity's constant local presence, in the person of Mark Kuster. "This is the best way to ensure that we do not miss anything, that we can participate at the monthly meetings of the district government, where the next steps of each project are discussed. And this is the only way to ensure the responsible use of the European donations," as he states in an interview with the MZ.

Introducing the projects

One or two of the projects can now be visited by tourists: this benefits the donations kitty and more importantly is useful publicity for Camaquito, deepening the interest in the charity's work. Studiosus makes full use of this opportunity for its travel groups. Individual tourists are also welcome to find out more about Camaquito. For example, provided that advance notice is given to *Paradiso*, Cuba's in-country agency for cultural tourism, or directly to Mark Kuster, you can take a look behind the scenes at the famous Ballet de Camaguey or attend a performance of the children's theatre *La Andariega*. Some 50 to 70 groups or individuals now visit annually, paying between 80 cents and 3 Euros per person, and benefitting the agency, rather than Camaquito. But as Mark Kuster says: "After returning from their visit to Camaguey visitors can if they like contribute to our donations account." Eduardo Jiménez Ramírez is more explicit: "We are all ready to get involved, to make things happen – mostly its just the money that is missing." [Mittelbayerische Zeitung](http://MittelbayerischeZeitung) 16.12.2012 translated A.Kay